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ABSTRACT

A linguistic "false friend" is a word which is spelled or pronounced the same way in two or more languages or dialects of a single language, yet which has a unique meaning in each different language. Similarly, cultural "false friends" occur when people from different cultures think they have concepts and mores in common, yet they actually attach different values and perspectives to these concepts and mores, and the commonality is only superficial. A study of the American-Australian interface is specifically detailed. Linguistic material is drawn from the Australian Macquarie dictionary, and cultural evidence from the work of Hall (1959) and Renwick (1980). With evidence presented by Brena (1980) for example, it is speculated that Australians may share more common perspectives with Egyptians than with North Americans when the concept of "friendship" is considered. Examples given, such as attitude towards work and humour, are those which are reported to cause friction between Americans and Australians. Further difficulty is seen as workers in the field are predominately American and consequently the scholarly work itself has an American perspective. (Author)

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FRICTION CAUSED BY INTERCULTURAL "FALSE FRIENDS." CASE STUDY: AMERICA AND AUSTRALIA.

A paper presented at the Australian Communication Association's National Conference.

Canberra, ACT, July 17-20.

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FRICTION CAUSED BY INTERCULTURAL "FALSE FRIENDS."

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False Friends in Different Languages

The concept of the "false friend" is most familiar to language teachers, and, at the risk of stating the obvious, will be explained here because it is central to the present argument. The "false friend" is a word which is spelled or is pronounced the same way in two or more languages yet which has a unique meaning in each language. For example, "Je demand" in French is merely that I ask, but to "demand" in English carries a stronger implication. (There is a theory to explain the derivation of this difference. It goes back to the Norman Conquest when the Norman lord merely had to ask and his subjects treated the request as an order). Similarly, "mouton" in French means a sheep, yet in English "mutton" means sheep meat. While the Saxons looked after the sheep, the French seingneurs ate them!

There are, of course, "false friends" within regional dialects in the United States, and between American English and British English. Friction can be caused at a formal meeting between the

two nationalities when it is moved that a motion be "tabled." As evidence from experience, and from both the Random House (1966) and the Oxford (1971) dictionaries attests, this can mean to an American that the matter be put aside until later, and to a person from the English tradition that it be presented immediately, that is, "put on the table." As American English continues to expand and the "British" English contracts to become a dialect of American English, this type of misunderstanding is becoming more infrequent.

The topic of this paper is the friction caused by the linguistic false friends between American English and Australian English, and the concomitant friction caused by their cultural counterparts between the two groups who use those dialects of world English. It probably came as a surprise to many North Americans that there was a distinct version of the English language claimed by the Australians, and that there was a dictionary of Australian English---the Macquarie dictionary. The advent of the Macquarie dictionary was news in the U.S., and made the front page of the Wall Street Journal. What might not be so well known to Australians is that the Macquarie was based on the American College Dictionary which was first published in 1969, and that the Macquarie first offered an account of Australian English in 1981. As Delbridge (1981) reports, it was the first general reference dictionary "ever to present a set of entries for a comprehensive word list in which all the pronunciations,

all the spellings, and all the definitions of meaning are taken from the use of English in Australia, and in which Australian English becomes the basis of comparison with other national varieties of English." The objective of this dictionary is to "give the Australian community carefully assembled information about its own use of English within the tradition which began here about 150 years ago."

The pronunciations are not "Strine" (equivalent to American "hillbilly" patois) nor are entries merely standard American with the addition of Australian colloquialisms or slang terms. The dictionary takes into consideration the fact that Australians pronounce many English words quite differently from the way Americans do, for example, by stressing the antepenultimate rather than the penultimate syllable in such words as "dictionary" or "library." Also, as Delbridge points out "many of the common words of world English, words like station, yard, track, house, terrace, flat, have uses in Australia that are not adequately covered in any of the great dictionaries of the world: not in the whole family of Oxford dictionaries, and not in the various dictionaries that take Webster's name." This propensity of Australian English to contain terms with quite distinctive meanings can cause frustration and consternation to an American travelling in Australia, and, conversely, to Australians abroard. This is quite a well known phenomenon as the Wall Street Journal (1983) could quote G. A. Wilkes, a professor of

English literature at the University of Sydney, as saying that: "It's fair to say that two Australians could have a conversation that no other English speaker could understand."

Rapid Encroachment of the American Language

It is on the most important matter of the rapid encroachment of the American version of the English language on the domain of other dialects that we will conclude this linguistic analogy and turn to a discussion of cultural false friends. To avoid a lengthly discourse on the subject, we shall concentrate on an ilustrative case. In 1980, John Bremner, a professor at the University of Kansas, who had been brought up in Australia, could state confidently about the usage of the phrase "down under": "Australians and New Zealanders don't refer to themselves as coming from Down Under, any more than they refer to Americans and Canadians as coming from Up Over." This is simply no longer the case. The Australian team in the America's Cup yacht race of 1983 had an unofficial anthem by the rock group Men-at-Work which had as a theme "I come from a land down under." The race and the song had an immediate and widespread impact upon the sports-minded Australians. Also, with the multitude of T-shirt and other casual wear slogans featuring the description, and with

the term being used constantly by television commentators and personalities, it is now accepted parlance in Australia, even though it betrays an inbuilt Northern Hemisphere perspective. This is not to deny that there are many examples of linguistic hold-outs. For example, service stations in Australia have had the notice "discount gas" emblazoned on their placards for many years, yet the Australian motorist will invariably refer to "petrol," a term not much used in North America, if it is used at all.

While Australians have been inured to the Hollywood version of American speech for over fifty years via motion pictures, they have, of recent years, been much more affected by the vast amount of American television both recorded and currently satellited live into their homes. It is no wonder then that the Australians' cultural geography is not internally consistent. While thirty years ago Bing Crosby would sing "Jingle Bells" and "White Christmas" in the searing Summer heat in Australia, at least the radio station playing the song was in Australia, and the announcer might inject an indigenous touch. Now the Los Angeles scene is transmitted live in Sydney, and the disjunctions of time, place and season are glossed over by the conventional bonhomie of the professional broadcaster.

Also, it must be admitted that Australia has always been a ready market for cultural imperialism which emanated initially from England. For example, in the nineteen fifties it was still

relatively common for third generation Australians to refer to England as "home." Today, such examples of what is currently labelled the "cultural cringe" have been replaced by cringing towards the United States. From Sesame Street onwards, the Australian viewer is accustomed to watching a large amount of American television fare as Breen (1981) has documented.

While the linguistic "false friends" may be fading from the scene because of the universal and spreading influence of the American mass media, cultural "false friends," which are shaped by participating in a culture, may be less affected by the media, and so are likely to remain a problem. In fact, as more extensive and rapid travel brings more personal interaction, perhaps it may increase in relative importance.

Cultural False Friends.

"George Renwick (1980) in his book Australians and North Americans has correctly identified a major source of friction between Australians and Americans. He points out that Americans expect Japanese to be different from Americans and, when some points of cultural similarity are found, it is very reassuring. On the other hand, there is a perception amongst many Americans that Australians are "just like us." Having grown from an English

colony, inhabited a large unexplored continent, fought alongside in most this century's wars, and shared American mass culture, the two nations clearly have much in common. The problem arises when national characteristics come to the fore after they have been misconceived as commonly held values. Then friction seems inevitable. The American, who expected the Australian to be "just like us" is frustrated by unpredictable behavior. These are situations which are cultural "false friends."

Before one can identify cultural false friends one must be able to distinguish between the expected behaviours from each culture. For example, one would have to designate a specific behaviour for any specific situation. Given a specific stimulus, what would be the specific response? What cultural patterns, for example, are specifically American and what are specifically Australian?

To elucidate the theory underpinning this diagnostic system, we need go no further than the seminal work in the field which is Edward T. Hall's The Silent Language and from which the axiom "Culture Communicates" has been developed. Simply stated, Hall claimed that people learned in three different ways: formally, informally and technically. Technical learning was at school. Formal learning was by prescription as when a parent told a child, "Do this," or "Don't do that." Informal learning was by modelling where whole clusters of related activities were learned at a time, in many cases without the knowledge that they were

being learned at all. The impact of culture is evident when the untaught, unspoken rules of society were subject to scrutiny because of a challenge from a person or persons from outside the culture. Thus Japanese men may giggle, Arabs may hold hands, Latin Americans stand close together and Australian workers may be very offhand with their bosses. All the above behavior may cause many North Americans to be ill at ease, all because of patterns which were learned informally and never subjected to conscious evaluation by any of the cultures involved.

Renwick gives some indication of differences between Australians and Americans. Class differences (according to Renwick) in Australia are not as marked as in America, yet Australians are more class-conscious than Americans and may take offence if they feel they are being belittled. Australians value collective effort, Americans value individualism and competition. Thus the ideas of cooperation and competition, egalitarianism and achievement, contradiction and consistency, while never expressed and perhaps never even conceptualized by individuals of either culture, constantly lie at the root of social friction between individuals and groups along national, that is cultural, lines.

To take an important example, the concept of "friendship" is a cultural false friend. While all the parties involved may agree to a dictionary definition, be it from an Oxford, a Webster or a Macquarie, and from this fact we can deduce that the problem is

not a linguistic one, the dictionary definition is not sufficient to bridge the cultural communication gap. The different groups operationalize their definitions quite differently. For example, while Americans seem more "friendly" than Australians (Renwick, 1980, p. 15), the Australians are the ones who are more likely to make deep and long-lasting friendships, in accordance with the dictates of their fabled "mateship" culture. Americans tend to share mutual concern when there is a goal outside the relationship such as a job to be done, thus seeming shallow and superficial to Australians. This finding is compatible with the work reported by Margaret Nisi Brena (1980) on the meaning of friendship. When compared with Egyptians who stressed such qualities as loyalty, fidelity, and faithfulness, Americans were more concerned with a close, emotionally satisfying relationship than with its duration and permanence. If this is the case, then many Australians may be more akin, in this matter at least, to the Egyptians than to the North Americans.

The Experts Themselves are Culturally Biased.

"More pertinent to the membership of the Australian Communication Association, because most of the published work in the field is American, and there are currently very few Australian scholars

looking at intercultural differences, the reports will suffer in the aggregate from this fact alone.

Renwick (1980, p. 20) reported that Australians who come in contact with Americans considered the Americans to be negligent in their lack of knowledge about Australia. He then provided some internal evidence to bolster any prejudice an Australian reader of his book might have had. For example, he described a leading national weekly magazine The Bulletin as if it were defunct, and misspelled the name of Australia's largest and oldest city. (The latter error, spelling "Sydney" as "Sidney" is quite common for Americans and is, of course, a classic false friend).

The quotation was within the context of a discussion about Australians' attitude towards authority:

> The Australians' resentment of superiors, like their loyalty to equals, is deeply rooted and long standing. It had its origins in their early experience in the outback and was reinforced by the bush ethos, the bush unions, and the Bulletin (a widely circulated and influential nationalist weekly published in Sidney around the turn of the century). Their resentment has now become a consistent cultural theme.

It is, perhaps, worth noting here that The Bulletin has, since 1984, incorporated large sections of Newsweek within its covers, thus becoming a hybrid periodical which must certainly be seen, from one point of view, as an excellent example of Australian-American cooperation, and from another as an another example of cultural imperialism.

But these are minor errors of fact and would not be noticed by Renwick's intended (American) audience.

Of more significance, is Mr. Renwick's assertion that Australians "have only qualified respect for hard work." In a section entitled: Bludgers vs. Producers he defines the slang expression of "bludger" as "that person, much admired, who has perfected the art of appearing to do a prodigious amount of work while actually doing very little." A cursory content analysis of Australian newspapers would lead an observer to the contrary conclusion that bludgers are necessarily much admired. In fact, a contemporary term "dole bludger" is used as a term of opprobrium to mean an unemployed person on welfare. The Macquarie Dictionary, the dictionary of Australian English, defines a bludger as a "pimp" or one who evades responsibilities, or imposes on others. It seems reasonable to question that such a person is much admired. Perhaps the bludger might be the subject of rueful humour, and a contrary hypothesis to Mr. Renwick's is that the American researcher might have misread cultural cues. After all, (on p. 29) Renwick observes: "Australians...feel that humour is appropriate (and even essential) in a wider variety of situations than do Americans. Also, Australians bring some of their cynicism into their humour." Thus a contrary hypothesis to Renwick's might be that the Australians who told Mr. Renwick that they admired bludgers were exercising their Australian style of humour at the expense

of an American sociologist.

It seems evident then that future work must be done to isolate those behaviors which are distinctive to each culture so that direct contrasts and comparisons can be made. The current state-of-the-art is participant observation, mostly American and ad hoc. Furthermore, because of the influence of American corporations and mass media, what is uniquely Australian seems to be diminishing regardless of the countervailing pressures spurred on by nationalism. This complicates the task of any researcher striving for clearcut stimulus-response models. Despite these serious caveats, it would be interesting to see more Australian work in the field, and perhaps of even greater value, work from researchers whose initial cultural imprinting were from neither of the cultures in question.

A potential breakthrough to the field would be an adaptation of the work of the Australian geographer Reginald Golledge (Parfit, 1984) who is chairman of the Geography department of the University of California at Santa Barbara. Gollege's speciality is the study of cognitive mapmaking. Using a computerized system called multidimensional scaling, he draws "maps" of cities showing where people think the landmarks are---not where they really are. He finds, for instance, that inner-city residents and suburbanites differ significantly in judging distances between important venues in the city, the placement of buildings, the lengths of freeways and other geographical features. The

interpretation of this phenomenon is that the psychological and cultural perceptions of the different groups affect their sense of place. Similarly, then, it should be possible to determine the cultural landscapes of different cultural groups. As his technique of pairing places in the city which are perceived to be close is conceptually similar to paired comparisons of adjectives, or for that matter, cultural abstractions, a cultural map of the perceptions of various groups should be readily attainable. Thus graphic representations of cultural attitudes of Americans and Australians would be available to show the different attitudes to such items as work, friendship, and authority which have been discussed. Ideally, these maps would need to be interpreted by researchers immunized, as far as possible, from cultural biases.

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